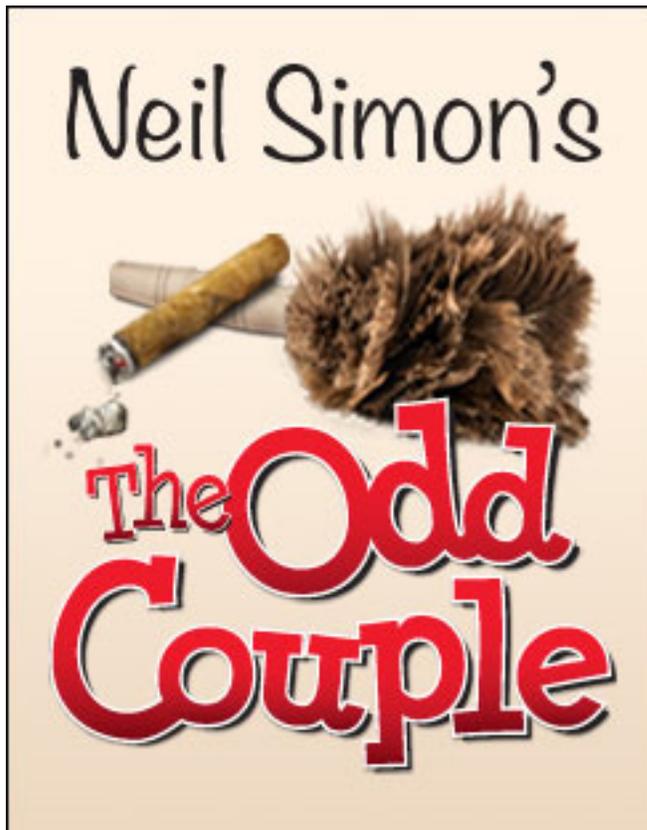


## JEWEL THEATRE AUDIENCE GUIDE



**directed by Stephen Muterspaugh**

### ABOUT THE PLAY

by Susan Myer Sifton, Dramaturg

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# ABOUT THE PLAY

OSCAR

If you're going to kill yourself, where's the safest place to do it? With your friends!

## CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Speed** (Scott Coopwood) one of the group of friends who play poker every Friday night

**Murray** (Jeff Fiorito) another poker buddy, an officer with the NYPD, married to Mimi

**Roy** (Jesse Caldwell) Oscar's accountant and another poker regular, his name is a nod to Roy Gerber, a model for the character of Oscar (see "Writing *The Odd Couple*: Origins", pp. 1-10)

**Vinnie** (Andrew Davids) another poker buddy, married to Bebe

**Oscar Madison** (David Ledingham) a sports journalist for the *New York Post*, divorced for a few months from Blanche

**Felix Ungar** (Shaun Carroll) a news writer for CBS, separated for a day from his wife, Frances, at the play's open

**Gwendolyn Pigeon** (April Green) an English expatriate, secretary for Slenderama, a health club, widowed

**Cecily Pigeon** (Erika Schindele) Gwendolyn's sister, also an English expatriate and secretary for Slenderama, divorced

## **FELIX**

**Marriages may come and go, but the game must go on.**

### **SYNOPSIS**

The play opens with the regular Friday night poker game underway at Oscar's spacious but unkempt and rather dirty bachelor apartment in New York's Upper West Side, where all the action of the play takes place. Regulars Speed, Vinnie, Roy and Murray are in attendance, but the dependable Felix is not. Murray's wife calls with news that Felix and his wife, Frances, married 12 years, separated the day before. After sending Frances a suicide telegram, Felix goes missing.

When he finally arrives, his worried friends are on edge, taking the despondent Felix's every move as a suicide attempt. Oscar manages to calm him down and offers that Felix move in with him. Figuring that he'll cook and clean and save them both money for alimony and child support, Felix agrees.

The next scene opens on the following Friday night's poker game in Oscar's apartment, which is hardly recognizable now that Felix has so meticulously cleaned and tidied it. Despite Felix serving them food and drinks prepared precisely to order, the card players leave in a huff, unable to relax in the pristine apartment with its newly-installed air-purifier and disinfected playing cards. Felix's obsessive cleaning, not to mention his whining, hypochondria and incessant talking, is not only breaking up the poker game, but also driving Oscar, a cigar-smoking, charismatic, generally good-natured, compulsive slob, out of his mind.

To help Felix unwind, Oscar presses him for a double-date with Cecily and Gwendolyn Pigeon, a young English widow and her divorced sister from the other side of their apartment building. Felix finally relents, excited by the prospect of preparing an elegant meal.

In the next scene, Oscar arrives home, bright with anticipation for the

evening ahead and bearing a bottle of expensive wine. However, he is nearly an hour late and Felix is livid that he hasn't called and hasn't come in time to help with the hors d'oeuvres. Most importantly, the London Broil is in danger of being overcooked and dry. They trade increasingly elevated gibes in an argument that is eerily spousal, displaying their mutual intolerance of the same flaws that drove their respective wives to leave them.

The Pigeon sisters show up, and when Oscar goes to fix them drinks in the other room, Felix crushes the mood with a long lament about his estrangement from his beloved family. The women are soon in tears, the meat burns to a crisp, and the evening is ruined.

It's the last straw for Oscar. The next day, after a bitter argument during which he slams a plate of linguine against the wall, Oscar kicks Felix out. As he makes his dramatic exit, Felix can't resist getting in the last word, which succeeds in making Oscar feel guilty. During the weekly poker game later that evening, Gwendolyn returns for Felix's clothes, followed right away by Felix and Cecily. They announce that Felix will move in with them until he finds another place to live. Felix and Oscar repair the rift in their friendship. Oscar takes a phone call from Blanche, where we hear he has caught up with his support payments. As the poker game resumes, Oscar, newly house-proud, cautions his pals to use coasters and ashtrays.

ROY

Hey, you want to do me a big favor? Smoke towards  
New Jersey.

## SETTING

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All of the action of the play takes place in Oscar Madison's apartment, which Neil Simon describes as "one of those large eight-room affairs on Riverside Drive in the upper eighties". The building was constructed in the late 1920s to early 1930s before the Second World War and is known as "pre-war". Simon describes the living room, the center of the play, as having "a lovely view of the New Jersey Palisades through its 12th floor window".

Riverside is the Upper West Side. It faces West across the Hudson River. With only Riverside Park directly between the Hudson River and Riverside Drive, no buildings block the view of New Jersey. The Westside highway is below the building on the riverbank itself. Riverside Drive in



the eighties faces Edgewater, New Jersey, above Fort Lee, although those towns had not yet been developed when the play was written.

Riverside Drive has not changed much since the 1960s. The buildings are the same.

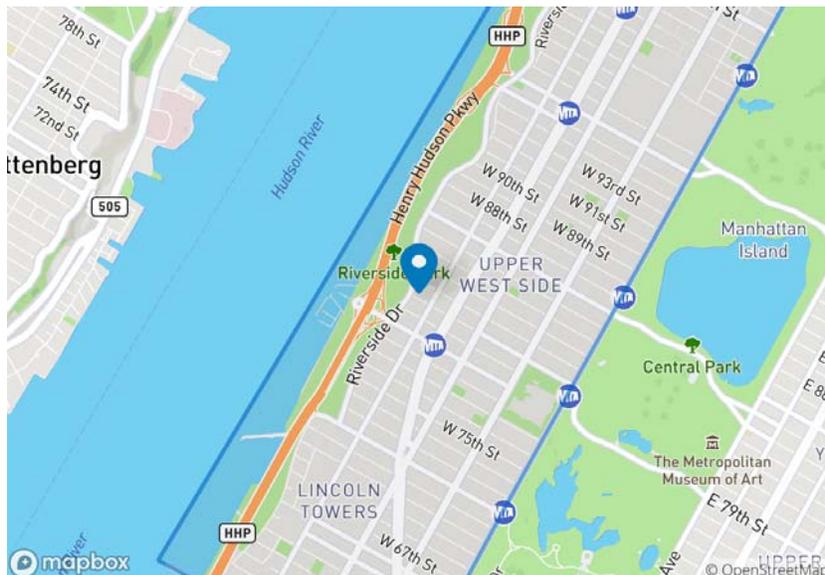
To the left is the current entrance of an apartment building at 90 Riverside Drive, which was built in 1927, during the same time frame as

Oscar's. It would have looked nearly the same in 1965.



Above is a recent image of the building at 90 Riverside Drive. Except for the style of the street signs, little has changed.

The map below shows the location of the apartment building pictured above.



MURRAY

Twelve years doesn't mean you're a *happy* couple. It just means you're a *long* couple.

## TIME

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Neil Simon started writing his play in 1961. It opened on Broadway in March, 1965, after short trial runs in Delaware and Boston. The earlier to mid-sixties are a time of havoc, characterized by huge political and social upheaval—and often, unease, confusion and disillusionment. The turmoil doesn't stop mid-decade, the time when the play is set, but continues to intensify into the 1970s.

Here are some of the important events that occurred from 1960 to the opening of *The Odd Couple* on Broadway.

### 1960

- Four black students begin a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter.
- "the pill", as it comes to be known, is approved for contraceptive use in the US. It's an instant hit: in two years, 1.2 million American women are taking it, and after three years, the number almost doubles to 2.3 million. The pill offers many women a more affordable and effective way to avoid pregnancy, catalyzing the sexual revolution and becoming an important part of the drive for gender equality in the 1960s. Because of the expanding possibilities offered by the pill, higher numbers of women graduate from high school and college, and more women than ever work outside the home.

### 1961

- John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, and at 42 the youngest president ever elected, is sworn into office on January 20.

- the CIA attacks Cuba in an ill-fated mission at the Bay of Pigs, which is meant to overthrow the increasingly communist government of Fidel Castro.
- “Cold War”, a state of geopolitical tension between the Eastern Bloc nations (the Soviet Union and its allies) and the Western Bloc nations (the US and its allies) intensifies. President Kennedy advises all “prudent families” to have a bomb shelter.
- Construction of the Berlin Wall begins.
- The Vietnam War officially begins.

## 1962

- The Cuban Missile Crisis begins when a US spy plane identifies long-range missiles in Cuba. President Kennedy readies troops to invade the island, and the Soviet Union prepares to fire at US cities if the US makes a move. After a long period of tense negotiations, Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev reach an agreement, setting the stage for reduced US–Soviet friction for several more years.
- Prayer in the public schools is declared unconstitutional.
- Due in great part to the efforts of attorney William Shea, the National League opens a new franchise in NY. The owners and fans select “Mets” as the nickname for the expansion team, formally named the “New York Metropolitan Baseball Club”. From the beginning, the Mets succeed in attracting the many former Dodgers and Giants fans, bereft of their teams’ defection to California.

## 1963

- John F. Kennedy is assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, destroying any vestiges remaining of the widespread sense of stability and contentment that had been generated by the hope and prosperity of the 1950s. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson becomes president.
- The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. issues his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” an open letter written in response to being called an “outsider” by his fellow clergymen. The letter defends the strategy, practiced by King and his followers, of nonviolent resistance to racism, for which he is incarcerated at the time of its writing. King writes, “Injustice anywhere

is a threat to justice everywhere" and says that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct action rather than waiting—potentially forever—for justice to come through the courts. The letter was widely published and becomes an important text for the Civil Rights Movement in the US.

- 300,000 people attend the "March on Washington" on August 28. Rev. King delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.
- Gloria Steinem goes undercover as a Playboy Bunny in Hugh Hefner's New York Playboy Club. Her two-part article, "A Bunny's Tale", is published in *Show* magazine, exposing the rampant sexism and casual dehumanization Bunnies face. In addition, Steinem shows how "profoundly tacky" and vastly overrated the club is for many of its patrons.
- In her chart-topping hit, "You Don't Own Me", Lesley Gore sings, "Don't tell me what to do, don't tell me what to say, don't try to change me in any way, don't tie me down 'cause I'd never stay". At the same time, Americans are making *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, with their images of the ideal nuclear family, the most highly watched shows on television. American women continue to be bombarded with contradictory expectations and conflicting images about work and family.
- The Presidential Commission on the Status of Women presents disturbing facts about the conditions endured by women in the US. Betty Friedan, Pauli Murray, Gloria Steinem, and the National Organization for Women give birth to Women's Lib, questioning the unequal treatment of women, and disclosing the "glass ceiling."

## 1964

- Malcolm X is suspended from the Nation of Islam and announces that he is forming a black nationalist party.
- The Civil Rights Act, which eliminates discrimination on the basis of race, is signed on July 2.
- The NY Mets take the field in the newly built Shea Stadium in Flushing Meadows, Queens.

- President Lyndon B. Johnson wins the presidential election.
- To prevent communist North Vietnam from overtaking South Vietnam, the United States sends military advisors there, followed by troops of soldiers. Anti-war sentiment begins to grow in the US.

## 1965

- Troops now number 190,000 in Vietnam.
- *The Odd Couple* premieres at Broadway's Plymouth Theatre on March 10, 1965, transferring to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre where it closes on July 2, 1967 after 964 performances and two previews.
- When *The Odd Couple* opens, 6.5 million American women are on the pill.
- On March 25, 32,000 people make 54-mile "freedom march" from Selma to Montgomery.
- On June 7, five years after the FDA approves the pill, Planned Parenthood wins the US Supreme Court victory, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, rolling back all state and local laws that outlaw the use of contraception.

# PRODUCTION HISTORY

OSCAR

**But that was just the beginning. Just the beginning.**

The history of *The Odd Couple* doesn't stop with the enormous success of the original play. The story has touched multiple generations of fans in all of its forms over the decades. In fact, it has spawned so many and varied iterations that a 276-page book was published in 2014 about its production history, written by Bob Leszczak and called *The Odd Couple on Stage and Screen: A History with Cast and Crew Profiles and an Episode Guide*.

It all started with *The Odd Couple's* premiere on March 10, 1965 at the Plymouth Theater in New York. The play ran on Broadway for 964 performances and has since performed all over the world. Neil Simon adapted the play in 1985 as *The Female Odd Couple*, with characters who closely resembled their male counterparts. It paired divorced roommates Florence Ungar and Olive Madison, who played a weekly game of Trivial Pursuit with their girlfriends. Simon also wrote an updated version in 2002 entitled *Oscar and Felix: A New Look at the Odd Couple*.

On the heels of the success of *Barefoot in the Park*, Simon sold Paramount his screenplay and the TV rights to *The Odd Couple* in 1967 when it was still only a concept. Paramount produced two theatrical films, three live-action TV series and an animated series based upon the play. The 1968 film version of *The Odd Couple* featured Walter Matthau in a reprisal of his stage role as Oscar, and Jack Lemmon as Felix. The film was a huge success, garnering Simon's screenplay an Academy Award nomination, and catapulting the already-famous actors to new levels of fame. They would reprise these roles in 1998 for *The Odd Couple II*, and again for the *Grumpy Old Men* films.

After the success of the 1968 movie, Paramount introduced a television version of the show in 1970. It starred Tony Randall as Felix and Jack

Klugman as Oscar. The show ran for five years and spawned a 1993 TV reunion film with the original cast.

Two other tie-ins to the series didn't fare as well. One was a Saturday morning cartoon, where the roles were played by a neat cat named Spiffy and a sloppy dog named Fleabag. Entitled *The Oddball Couple*, it aired in the fall of 1975, but was canceled after its first season.

The second ill-fated tie-in was *The New Odd Couple*, a reboot aired by ABC from 1982 to 1983 and starring African-American actors Ron Glass as Felix and Demond Wilson as Oscar. With the exception of updating some of the dialogue, it used the same scripts from the original series. Unfortunately, the sitcom was canceled after only 13 episodes.

CBS launched another remake in 2015, with Matthew Perry, best known for his role as Chandler on NBC's *Friends* TV series. He starred as Oscar and co-wrote and executive-produced the series as well. It ran for three seasons.

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## REFERENCES/FURTHER READING

**SPEED**

**I'll buy a book and I'll start to read again.**

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Neil Simon: A Critical Study by Edith M. McGovern, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., NY, 1978

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*Routledge Guide to Broadway* by Ken Bloom, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, United Kingdom, 2007

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